

centuries, to the great inroads of the comfort and power of the country gentlemen. Under the Tudors, the Crown learnt to repose entire confidence in the nobles of which, in Plantagenet times, it was always suspicious and distrustful. Nor was this confidence misplaced, for when, instead of a sheriff acting as factotum, a bench of Justices of the Peace represented and upheld the power of the Crown, the gentry served Elizabeth and her unfortunate successors with a passionate loyalty that they had never felt before.

In days long gone by, under the Norman Kings and Henry the Second, the sheriffs had been powerful barons and prelates, by whose help the Crown kept the more turbulent members of their own class in order. It was through their agency that England had been saved from feudal anarchy, and the King's peace established. In the reign of Richard the Second England was again drifting towards anarchy, but there was no longer any such class of great barons who could be trusted to serve the government faithfully as sheriffs. The office was now usually filled by a man of small wealth and social position, who often made himself an object of suspicion to the gentry, who should have been his chief supporters against turbulent nobles.

But while the old government by Sheriff, which had sufficed to suppress feudalism, was fast becoming ineffective, a new evil, the maintenance of retainers, demanded new remedies. The practice was not strictly feudal. The retainer was bound to his lord by contract for wages, and not by services implied in his tenure of land. The basis was no longer old feudal loyalty, but the cash nexus. During the closing years of the fourteenth and the whole of the fifteenth century, it was the custom of all great lords, and even of some prelates of the Church, to maintain their importance in society by hiring little armies of retainers, who lived at the expense, wore the livery, and fought the battles of their employer. The practice was in close connection with the military system of the government. The King, having no regular army, hired

¹ In this book the word *gentleman* (which in the fourteenth century so definite, restricted meaning) is used to designate the large number of classes—knight, esquire, franklin, etc.—roughly corresponding to the single class which was afterwards designated, in Tudor and Stuart times, by the word *gentleman*. See the *Ancestor* vol. i. Sir G. Shewell Prynne's article 'The Knight'